Finding Your Community, Remembering Your Dream (Job) by Guest Writer Shana T. Bryant

Community Procrow Feb 20, 2020

Hello Xbox Ambassadors! This is a guest submission by @mushrooqueendom, who was featured for Black History Month. We publish blog submissions from Xbox Ambassadors from time to time, and if interested, you can submit a blog here.

Foundation's Next Gen Leaders Program

2020 will mark my 4th year volunteering with the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) Foundation's Next Gen Leaders Program. What is it? It's a (brilliant) program aimed at supporting minority game developers through a multi-year series of mentorship, opportunity, development, and growth. Participants get passes to the Game Developers Conference — the premiere event for game developers; they get amazing content in the form of talks, workshops, and activities — specifically tailored to their lived industry experiences; and they get access to a broad array of talented industry elders, who have navigated many of the obstacles that software/tech/games presents us marginalized folks. It's both a career level-up and a networking bonanza! (It's also just a ton of fun, and hey you, you should apply next year.)

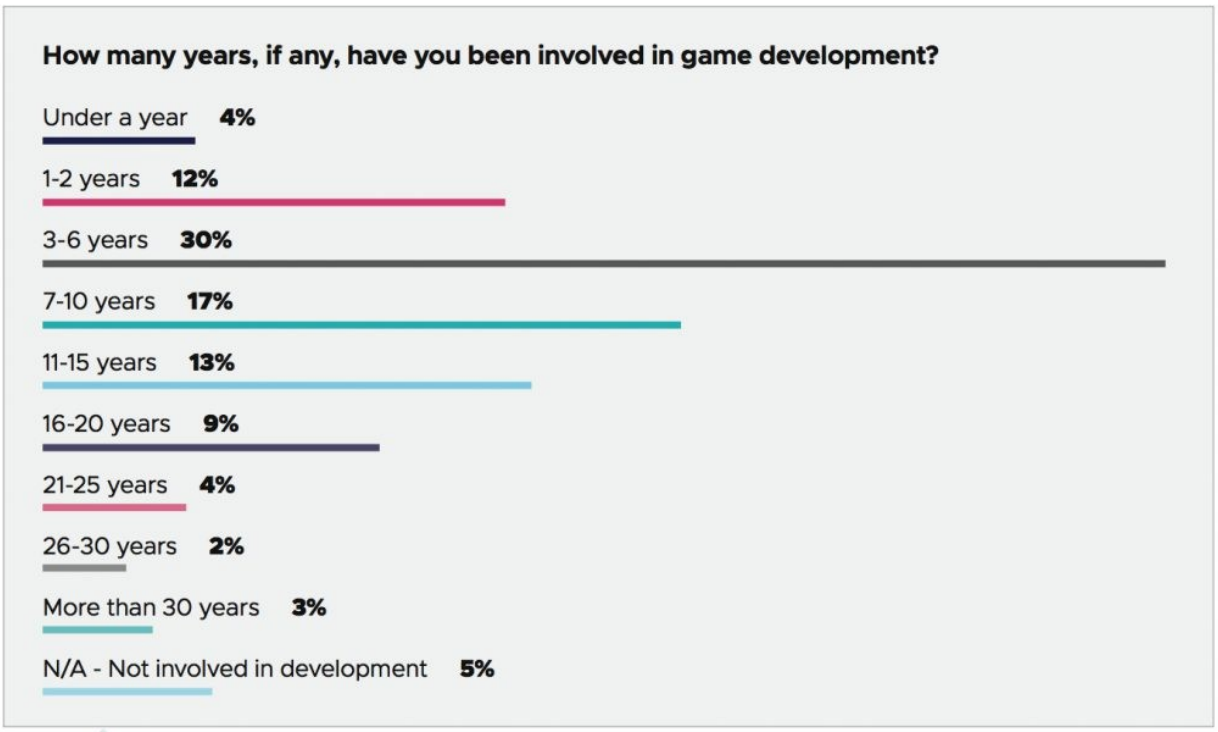
What I love about opportunities like Next Gen Leaders is it’s like flexing a different set of muscles. NGL gives me the chance to talk about the

intangibles and the totality of experience — the good, the bad — basically, the stuff that doesn't appear in the brochures. After so many years in any industry, there can be a tendency to settle in to what's comfortable (or at least, to settle for what's familiar); but coming up in an adolescent version of the games industry — one that had yet to admit its problems with diversity and institutional biases, much less spar with them — the desire to give back is what I always find pulling me forward. I jumped at the chance to volunteer with the IGDA Foundation. It has been rewarding in ways far beyond my wildest expectations, and its specific focus on underrepresented folks is critical, especially given the length of the average career in games.

"…game development [is] an industry driven by young workers… who tend to depart within a decade."

That's a key takeaway according to the 2020 State of the Game Industry report, a figure-laden compilation of developer stats and metrics, self-reported. It serves to take the annual pulse of the industry. Going on, it states…

"33 percent of respondents said they'd been making games for 3-6 years, 18 percent said they'd been making games for 7-10 years… These results match up very closely (within a few percentage points) to past surveys, reinforcing our understanding of game development as an industry driven by young workers who tend to depart within a decade."



GDC State of the Game Industry 2020

Put another way, well over half of the developers I work with today will leave the industry entirely in the next few years, before they reach their 10th anniversary.

But it's videogames, right? It's a dream job, right?

For some, yes. If you stay in games for anything more than a few years, then it probably is your dream job. If you leave any time after that, it's likely at best a dream deferred. Deferred to a time when things are better. Hours are better. Pay is better. Culture is better. But that "better" never comes unless we as game developers interrogate why things aren't good now.

See, for all like comfortable dress codes and rad desk swag, game dev also struggles. Not just to retain talent, but to retain the coveted "diverse" talent — women, POC, and other marginalized folk. Far too often, we find games to simply be a primordial microcosm of the same challenges we face in capital-t Tech and society at large.

Let's be honest. Games have skated by on good looks for far too long. The industry has dazzled many-a-newcomer with the prestige of being one of a chosen few to make it into these mythical halls, all while failing to identify or

address core dysfunction. And the result is conditions that, intentioned or not, can eventually drive talent out of games or tech altogether. We have to do better.

As for me, I got my first industry job in 2003. I was 23 years old, almost fresh out of college, and making games was also my dream job.

I almost left that dream job, so so many times.

As one of the first women hired to work alongside over 300 (yes, 300) men, it turned out my “dream” job was a place that struggled to make room for any woman, let alone a woman of color. Looking back, some of my best friends or colleagues might presume that what’s kept me going as long as I have been was some strange combination of luck and stubbornness. Don’t get me wrong, those things no doubt play(ed) quite a part. But I tend to likewise credit a certain something as my own lifeline.

That something, that Chemical X as it were, is community.

It was finding your people. Those with that same shared, lived experience. Where you can almost finish each other’s sentences, because they know. Where I don’t have to explain why it I can’t use the hotel shampoo, because they know. Where there’s no code to switch, because they know.

And here we are, smack-dab in the middle of another Black History Month, at the peak of human technology and human community. With social media, meetups, ERGs (employee resource groups), and more, community has never been more accessible. I think we as a society better understand that community plays a role in the health and wellbeing of our lives and careers, even if we don’t explicitly say it, I think it’s a thing that still very much needs to be said.

Part of the IGDA Next Gen Leaders 2019 Leadership, after the Allies SIG Workshop

The way I see it, as we build communities that uplift and care for one another, so too can they turn and care for the next generation of developers and the next. We can continue to push for change, and dissect systemic forms of oppressions and recognize the bad-faithers. We can clearly see that real change requires hard work and sacrifice; it’s not a function of good intentions or just “hiring good people and hoping it works out” (something an old manager actually said to me once). No, we can finally push forward to live in a world and work in an industry where we can exist on our own terms, as our own beautiful brown/Black selves. There’s no question it’s a big, big job and a lotta work, but if we keep on together, we will as they say reach that mountaintop.

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